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Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920–2000.

By Jacob Eyferth. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009.
Pp. xv+335. \$45.

Among numerous monographs on rural China published in the last decades, this distinguished book by Jacob Eyferth is attractive for anyone interested in the social and economic transformation of China under different political conditions during the twentieth century. The focal actors of this study are handicraft-skilled rural residents, who are socially categorized as peasants (*nongmin*) in the rural-urban dual system of discourse used since the Republican time. The empirical data stem from the handicraft papermakers in Jiajiang, Sichuan Province, who earned and earn their livelihood through using the skills of turning bamboo roots into sheets of paper. The book is divided into nine chapters and additional introductory and con-

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cluding chapters; the appendix comprises a glossary of general terms as well as technical terms of papermaking in Pinyin transcription and Chinese characters, notes, bibliography, and index—very practical and useful for those readers lacking expertise in technological knowledge of handicraft papermaking. The main goal of this book is to explore the production-related skills (technical and social) and the skills of everyday life that make it possible for the actors to continue their profession throughout series of grand historical events—war, revolution, the construction of socialism, the advent of market-oriented reform policies.

This work is a social history of a community organized around the papermaking handcraft. Sociological elements related to the dynamics of kinship, gender, and social hierarchy, all related directly to the appropriation and implementation of the skills for producing and merchandising sheets of paper, are woven throughout a narrative history of the community. The history unfolds in four parts, the first during the period from the late Qing dynasty to the Republic in which the papermakers were categorized as peasants, thus neglecting their skills (chapter 4); the second, when China set out on the socialist road from 1949 to 1958 and papermaking workshops were collectivized (chapter 5); the third, during the Great Leap Forward (1958) and after, in which period papermaking experienced decline, mainly due to the state policy of rural deindustrialization (chapter 6); and the fourth, the reform era since the late 1970s, when the rural artisans had to constantly adjust to both state policies and market needs (chapters 7 and 8).

In the author's analysis, existing production skills embodied in the local social structure are the shared property of the community of papermakers in Jiajiang. They are their subsistence resources; they have the same relevance for the artisans as arable land has for farmers. Throughout the twentieth century and to the present, this basic fact has not been acknowledged in the redistribution of resources or the conceptualization of the future of the local economy. The fatal results for the papermakers, seen repeatedly, are the devaluation of their skills, the separation of skills and human bodies, and the ignorance of the social contexts where skills are located. These devaluations consistently took place in the name of science and rationality in discourses of modernization, even though they were initiated by different power-holders with different political aims during different historical phases.

Social anthropologists as well as historians should feel fortunate to have such a rich ethnography about a subgroup of rural residents at hand. Through long-term participant observation and intensive interviews, the author achieves the necessary depth of emic insights. In particular, this research offers a fascinating new insight: the disjunctions of the two kinds of skills, namely the technical ones and those of everyday life, with the former being convertible into social status and material interests. The rich descriptions of deskilling processes likewise remind anthropologists to consider bodily techniques and their social surroundings together.

Based on the insights won through this historical study, scholars might be stimulated to re-think some acute problems of rural residents: old handicraft skills might be acknowledged as intangible cultural heritage. How can they be protected effectively without allowing their bearers to be excluded from participating in the modern life? How could the rural residents combine the two kinds of skills optimally in order to transform their technological know-how into social status and material interests? If the disjunction of these two kinds of skills has been historically embedded in the rural culture, what does rapid urbanization mean for the rural residents? What does the university education mean for the numerous graduates with rural backgrounds, who have learned neither professional techniques nor the skills of everyday life appropriate for either urban or rural surroundings? The depictions of the skilled people of more than three generations give us historical insights for a better understanding of contemporary China.

This book presents an ethnography with historical depth and a social history with ethnographic insights. The clear structure, straightforward summaries of huge bodies of existing literature, amount of primary data from local archives, intensive empirical data from field research, and comprehensively developed theoretical lines make it an informative, stimulating work. It is a pleasure to read as well. It is recommended for scholars of China studies, social history, STS, and social anthropology.

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